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Some middle-class wives
and sisters-in-law

Deceased wife's sister bill

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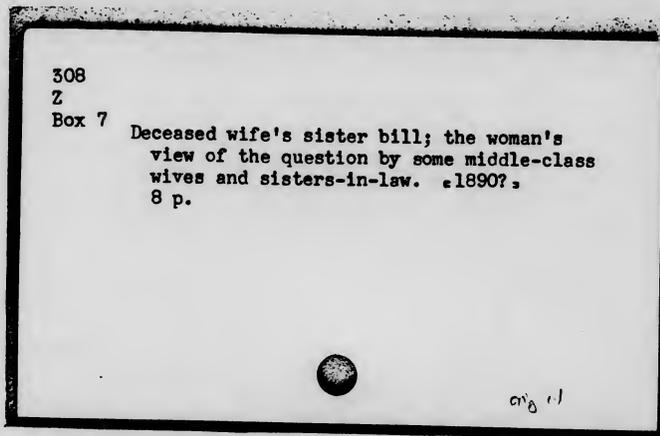
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DECEASED WIFE'S SISTER BILL.

THE WOMAN'S VIEW OF THE QUESTION

BY

SOME MIDDLE-CLASS WIVES AND SISTERS-IN-LAW.

DECEASED WIFE'S SISTER BILL.

*From the MIDDLE-CLASS WOMEN OF ENGLAND TO THE
HOUSE OF COMMONS.*

The question whether our marriage laws shall be altered or not, is one that will shortly come before the country, possibly for final settlement; and we think that hitherto it has been discussed on an unfair basis, namely, without considering the feelings of those chiefly interested.

We have waited in hopes that some well-known and influential voices would be raised in behalf of the woman's side of the question, which would represent what may be expected to be the practical results of the contemplated change. We have waited in vain, all are silent. Men seem more and more indifferent, and the issue appears to be sinking into a mere *party question*.

Is it possible that, for mere want of thought, a grave domestic evil will be laid upon the country, and that by men who in practice will loath the inroad of confusion, sin and unhappiness that such a bill as this will bring?

The keynote of our position was struck by a speech of Lord Coleridge's, in which he says:—"Speaking of marriage, besides the man there is the woman, and, in such a matter, it will hardly be disputed that she has equal

* In the debate in the House of Lords, 1880.

moral rights with the man. If the vast majority of women in point of number (and especially the majority of refined and educated women in England) are opposed to this measure, if it is abhorrent to their feelings, what right have men, even if all were agreed, to overbear them and disregard their feelings? Such a matter as this is not easy of demonstration. I can only speak as I believe. I scarcely know one amongst my own acquaintance that upholds it."

He says also that, "as a rule, men, most earnest in support of the new measure, have admitted with regret that women as a whole dislike it. It is then not generous, it is not manly, not, in my opinion, just, to persevere in it.

"That the majority of men who support this measure are eagerly desiring to marry their sister-in-law, I most entirely disbelieve. It is, and always has been, the result of an agitation for which I have neither respect nor sympathy; and further, I believe that an agitation might be got up for legalising marriage with any other kinswoman of the wife, certainly, for example, with the wife's niece, if the same trouble were taken, and the same money spent.

"The bill is founded on no principle; it sets men free but it leaves woman bound; it lets the husband marry his wife's sister because it is said she is not his sister; but it forbids the wife to marry her husband's brother. Where is the justice, where the common sense, of this argument? Suppose it was step-children: would anyone bear for an instant with a proposition that a man might marry his wife's daughter, but that a woman might not marry her husband's son? My noble friend knows that he dare not bring forward a measure founded upon any such principle—he knows that the whole nation would rise against it with scorn. Is it unfair then to say that this measure is advocated to please *a few men who have broken the law*, and to set free *a few*

more men who wish to break it, but who are firmly determined that the liberty they claim for themselves they will deny to their widows?

"I deny that the general sentiment supports it. I deny also that it is for the general good. It is not easy to overstate the benefit which the whole society derives from the social relationship at present possible between the husband and the wife and the family of the other. *Affection* into which passion does not enter is the great civilizer of mankind. *Passion* we share with the brutes; unpassionate affection refines and lifts up, and is the source of half the graces and more than half the beauty and happiness of social life, and it has always been considered by thoughtful men that one reason why these marriages have been prohibited is, that it extends the domestic and social relations, and so helps to cement and to hallow the bonds of society. *Now* your wife's sisters are your own, and the circle of your *home* is largely widened."

Thousands can testify of the joy produced in a family on the announcement of a sister's marriage—"the new brother," the fraternal affection given and received.

This detestable change in the law made, a man takes his wife on her wedding day she; gives up her old home; the members in that home gain no new brother. He becomes, as it were, a connection, but not a relation; brotherly and sisterly union vanishes, his wife's sisters must be to him like any other women, acquaintances only, with whom it might be dangerous to associate in the present easy family fashion. Anyhow, *appearances* must be regarded—"What will the world say?"

Or, if a man may and can disregard this, weigh well the danger to your wife's peace, the new and invidious element of discord that this change in the relationship would intro-

duce into our homes, susceptible to jealousy as all or most women are. And this jealousy is not of necessity a weakness or a sin. It is implanted in their nature. The affection of their husband is their just right, their most valued property. Men are differently constituted in mind as well as body, but they *can* be similarly affected: for what enrages a man more than to have jealous feelings roused towards his wife?

Let us entreat the country at large to open its eyes, and note well how *momentous* is this question at issue!

Let each man look to the interests, the vital happiness, of the women of his own household, and from them judge for the sex at large—they number the larger half of the population. If they have not equal rights with men in many matters, surely they have in this. All just rulers of this land—the land of the happiest homes and hearths in all the world—would desire they should be legislated for with due consideration. At present their voice and power in questions of government are so small that the greater part pay no attention to politics at all, holding it a hopeless task, and are not *awake* to the mischief working against them; but again there *are* thousands of our best, our most educated and refined womenkind, who are pained to the quick at the dire prospect, yet feel a shrinking from bringing their fears before the public, and have no means of making themselves heard. *They* know what the change will bring, the discomfort, yea the torture—for righteous jealousy is closely followed by the evil one in his black aspect of envy (the prince of sins). They do not exactly define to themselves whether they are possessed by a right or a wrong passion; they know peace may then be far from their bosoms, yet they fear to be misunderstood if now they lift up their voices to defend a law in truth very precious to them.

We say such women number thousands, could we but get at them. Surely these classes should be especially cared for, and some pains taken to discover their desires on a point so vital to their happiness, by men who prefer to speak personally for their womenkind to letting them stand up for themselves in public. Surely this is a case for them to show a chivalrous spirit on their behalf!

It has been strongly urged by some that, to the very poor and uneducated, this change of law would be a great boon, but this opinion is but little held by men who have real knowledge of the daily life and sentiments of the lower classes. They would tell us such considerations are but clap-trap. Family ties are not so strong with the lower classes as with the higher, separated as they mostly are in childhood; and secondly, the sister does not commonly come to the aid of her sister's children when help is needed, there being few unmarried in that class, and few who would be able to afford help: for if single they are seeking their own livelihood. Few do or can make the sacrifice of taking charge of a brother-in-law's household in the case of his losing his wife. It is in the upper and lower middle class where the sister comes to help the struggling wife, borne down by care and the anxiety of a large family, with small means and often delicate health—here it is where the wife's sister is so often the good Samaritan, but who, if the law is changed, must henceforth be banished from this sacred intimacy in her sister's home.

Well, then, *for* whom and *by* whom is the change desired?

As a rule, we admit you should be tender to minorities, but this is a case in which you cannot indulge the wishes of the minority without doing a great injustice and inflicting a terrible hardship on the majority.

Let us explain. Most men do not lose their wives, and for them this change has no significance. To some there comes a time when the light of their lives goes out—their wife dies. Some of them recover, form fresh ties, begin their life again, and marry another woman. *The majority* of such men do not wish to marry their wife's sister; for them also this bill is of no use, but may be most mischievous. There remain then those who do not desire to form new ties of marriage. To these men—and to those who do re-marry, until they re-marry, the society of a wife's sister is often a blessing unspeakable—who can count the instances of comfort and happiness which this relation has given to men when most needing such comfort?

Why, for the sake of those few who do want to marry their dead wife's sister, are sisters-in-law to be abolished?

You *do* abolish them if this measure is passed. Why are half the maiden maternal aunts to be turned adrift, their occupation with, and active interest in, their sister's children taken from them? For this also will be the effect. Why is the happiness and good of the *many* to be sacrificed to the passions of the *few*? (or happiness of the few, if you think it just to put it so?) Why is the comfort and peace of a thousand households to be thus sacrificed?

Why are sisters-in-law, living with widowed brothers-in-law, to be ordered to quit the house or marry their brothers-in-law?

Why is distrust to be sown where perfect love, frank familiarity, pure affections and sympathy were before unrestrained? By passing this measure you point out by Parliamentary statute the sister-in-law as the probable successor of the wife, and what modest woman will put herself in the way of such a succession, when most people would say she was manifestly seeking it? "As a general

rule, among decent persons of all ranks," said the venerated author of the "Christian Year," "a law which would place the wife's sister in the same relations to the husband, as any unmarried woman not only *might*, but *must*, separate the wife's sister from the family, not only after the wife's death, but in case of her long illness or absence. She will require the same protection that any other woman would in the like circumstances."

A word more—let each one think for himself of the few instances in his neighbourhood where this law has been *broken*—let him study the bearings of each one, and we are much mistaken if sin is not discovered to be the cause of the union—attachment in the wife's lifetime; or, the object is a mercenary one, of little value to the public generally.

If this law is passed, these few cases of sorrow and confusion will be multiplied through the length and breadth of the country, till we know not the good land of our fathers.

We earnestly hope England may never in an evil hour loosen her restrictions with regard to marriage. In America one marriage in every eleven is followed by a divorce, and in Germany, where marriage between uncles and nieces is permitted, all the domestic relations are broken up.

Relax our marriage laws and we open wide the flood-gates and know not whither the torrent will carry us. They are not barriers against liberty, but fences against harm—restraints which have contributed in no small degree to the purity and happiness of our family and domestic life, and are an important element in the moral strength of the whole nation. Remove these restraints, relax these laws, for whom? For a few men who have married their dead wife's sister, for a few men who desire to do so, and for some more who will then gain property—

in all but a handful—but of whom it might be said “ They have bound themselves by an oath that they will neither eat nor drink ” till they have gained their point. But these are not the voices to be heeded by a good Government, and would not be listened to as they have been did men *see* the evil there is in the measure, as all thinking women do see it, and even the unthinking would, if the matter was put plainly before them.

Let us, before it is too late, join hand with hand to oppose it, and pray that the men will give us the opportunity of stating our case—privately through themselves or publicly, as they prefer, only *let us be heard somehow*.

Let *special* measures be taken to ascertain our wishes, for it is essentially a *woman's question*.

We commend this expression of our opinions to the earnest consideration of our countrymen.

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